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**TÍTOL: Materialist Criticism and Aesthetic Value: The Marketing Structures of Jane Austen's Novels and Van Dusen's *Bridgerton*.**

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**ABSTRACT:** The aim of this end of degree paper is to explore and analyse the aesthetic value of Jane Austen's silver fork novels and Netflix's *Bridgerton*, and observe how the dominant market structures have contributed to reinforce the status quo. To this end, both 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century marketing structures will be compared and analysed in terms of plot, structure and distribution. Taking as referent Terry Eagleton's Materialist Criticism Categories in *Criticism and Ideology* (2006) as supporting elements for the main thesis. Finally, the Austenian aesthetics has also been studied in the basis of its revisitation within Neo-Regency romances from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the impact products such as these have had on a modern audience which is considered to be more demanding. This study shows that there exist similar patterns in the production, exchange and distribution of modern entertainment goods which origins can be found in Colburn's publishing strategies back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century suggesting a highly ideological value within the text's aesthetics.

**Key words:** Eagleton, Austen, entertainment goods, Netflix, *Bridgerton*.

**RESUMEN:** El objetivo de este trabajo de final de grado es el de explorar y analizar el valor estético tanto en las novelas de Jane Austen como en la serie de Netflix *Los Bridgerton* con el fin de observar cómo las estructuras dominantes del mercado contribuyen al refuerzo del status quo. Con esta finalidad, ambas estructuras de mercado, tanto las del siglo XIX como las del siglo XX, serán comparadas y analizadas por lo que respecta al argumento, a la estructura y a su posterior distribución. Tomando como referencia las Categorías de Materialismo Crítico, expuestas por Terry Eagleton en su obra *Criticism and Ideology* (2006), como los elementos sobre los cuales se cimienta la tesis general. Finalmente, la estética Austeniana se ha estudiado desde el punto de vista de su periódica recurrencia en neo romances de la época de la Regencia y el impacto de este tipo de productos en una sociedad moderna que se presenta cada vez más exigente. Este estudio concluye que existen parámetros similares en la producción, el intercambio y posterior distribución de productos de entretenimiento moderno cuyos orígenes se remontarían en el sistema editorial de Colburn, sugiriendo un alto valor ideológico en la estética del texto.

**Palabras clave:** Eagleton, Austen, productos de entretenimiento, Netflix, *Bridgerton*.

## CONTENTS

<b>1. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. MATERIALIST CRITICISM CATEGORIES .....</b>	<b>7</b>
(i) General Mode of Production (GMP) .....	8
(ii) Literary Mode of Production (LMP) .....	8
(iii) General Ideology (GI) .....	9
(iv) Authorial Ideology (Aul) .....	9
(v) Aesthetic Ideology (AI) .....	10
(vi) Text .....	10
<b>3. JANE AUSTEN AND THE SILVER FORK NOVELS MODE OF PRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>12</b>
(i) Jane Austen's GMP .....	13
(ii) Jane Austen's Literary Mode of Production (LMP) .....	13
(iii) Jane Austen's General Ideology (GI) .....	14
(iv) Jane Austen's Authorial Ideology (AuI) .....	14
(v) Jane Austen's Aesthetic Ideology (AI) .....	15
(vi) Jane Austen's Text .....	17
<b>4. BRIDGERTON AND NETFLIX'S MODE OF PRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>19</b>
(i) Bridgerton's General Mode of Production .....	20
(ii) Bridgerton's Literary Mode of Production .....	20
(iii) Bridgerton's General Ideology .....	22
(iv) Bridgerton's Authorial Ideology .....	22
(v) Bridgerton's Aesthetic Ideology .....	22
(vi) Bridgerton's Text .....	23
<b>5. (NEO) REGENCY ROMANCES: 20th AND 21st CENTURY ESCAPIST PLEASURES &amp; THE AESTHETIC VALUE .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>6. CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>7. REFEENCES .....</b>	<b>30</b>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For the past decade, the consumption of entertainment goods has accelerated its pace according to the increasing rhythm of hyper-consumerism. The numerous streaming platforms such as Netflix, HBO, Amazon Prime, Starz Play or Apple TV define an era in which anything is both acquired and digested at a higher speed. Nonetheless, the success of these companies' marketing structures can be explained once back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the actual rules for these entertainment goods production and distribution were settled by publishers like Henry Colburn, who turned the business of fiction around by the advertising system and the distribution of novels by instalments. On the other hand, Terry Eagleton's development of the Materialist Criticism categories in *Criticism and Ideology* supports the vision that any entertainment good is the outcome of different factors that correlate with each other providing the text with a given ideological shape that affects their aesthetic value. Hence, the consumption of this kind of goods does not only trigger pleasure in an audience, but employing the aesthetic value seems to implement a set of ideological patterns – which typically belong to the dominant superstructures –. In other words, the act of consuming literature, therefore, becomes slightly political even when the purpose is merely that of enjoyment.

In this paper, I am going to make the corresponding marketing and ideological connections between Jane Austen's Regency romances and Netflix's show *Bridgerton* as, although their publications are centuries afar, there seem to be some similar patterns within their production and distribution that might have certain political implications within their consumption. To do so, I will first go over Terry Eagleton's Materialist Categories for a further analysis of Austen and the Regency romances modes of production compared to present entertainment goods as *Bridgerton*. The idea is to draw the 19<sup>th</sup> century patterns established by Colburn and the silver fork novelists and see the impact it might have had upon the current systems of production, distribution and consumption of fiction. I will not only be focusing on the shape and contents of the different entertainment goods, but also on the social, political and economic forces that seem to give shape to a specific text. For the purpose, I will be employing Eagleton's theory to develop a meticulous and structured analysis of each of the Materialist Categories. Although this paper mainly nourishes from Eagleton's criticism, further information regarding marketing procedures and aesthetic value will be applied to support the main thesis. On the other hand, I will try to justify the periodical revisitations to the

Regency period, specifically to the Austenian universe, by applying Eagleton's notion of Aesthetic Value in contrast to the current modes of production and ideological values.

## 2. MATERIALIST CRITICISM CATEGORIES

There seems to be a general tendency in which modern society citizens often adopt a more conscious way of consuming any kind of goods. The mere act of ingesting something as small and healthy as an avocado could become a political declaration in the sense that it can, first, imply a huge impact on the pollution of the atmosphere and, second, damage the Mexican economy to a point in which one of their basic nourishments becomes unaffordable. Then the impact that the consumption of entertainment goods may have on any kind of society may also be reconsidered. In the same way, when consuming a text are we not only filling ourselves with knowledge or allowing space for the entertainment of the mind. Rather than that, there are several aspects, such as ideological, political or historical factors, which are inherent to any kind of production and may be considered when it comes to determine a text's form and meaning. Nevertheless, those influential factors a text may present are discussed by Terry Eagleton, in his work *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary*, as an attempt to decode any kind of superstructures that interfere within the message in a text. Understanding a superstructure as the ideologies that dominate a particular era; all that "men say, imagine, conceive," including such things as "politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc." (Marx and Engels, 1965, p. 47). For such to happen, Eagleton comes up with the "the major constituents of a Marxist theory of literature" (Eagleton, 2006, p. 45):

- (i) General Mode of Production (GMP)
- (ii) Literary Mode of Production (LMP)
- (iii) General Ideology (GI)
- (iv) Authorial Ideology (Aul)
- (v) Aesthetic Ideology (AI)
- (vi) Text

Although all these constituents may be able to stand on their own, there seems to be an intrinsic relationship between them that is based on the influence of the dominant superstructures. So, the fact that a given text may convey one meaning or another is the result of the coordination of the previous constituents on the basis of the dominant power structures.

**(i) General Mode of Production (GMP)**

Any mode of production might be determined by social, political and historical factors. It is precisely due to those factors that within the different modes of production for any kind of goods there shall be a dominant one. In other words, the GMP will determine any kind of production system; it “is, an examination of the market conditions that allow any product to be created” (Pattee, 2006, p. 157).

**(ii) Literary Mode of Production (LMP)**

According to Eagleton "every LMP is constituted by structures of production, distribution, exchange and consumption" (Eagleton, 2006, p. 47). Hence, the LMP involves different agents or producers that are tightly related so the text is given not only shape but also an ideology. The network that the previously mentioned items build is as solid as the outcome in the sense that producers, distributors and consumers provide it with a three-dimensional approach. For a literary text to be released, first it needs to be produced. Besides the great importance that the author has in the making of a literary text, there seems to be a major force of influence upon what is being narrated; these are editors and publishing houses, which in a way or another determine the final outcome from the author. In other words, for a text to be published, there might be an agreement between the narrative techniques, events and even discourses used, which do not fully rely on the author's choice but on marketing criteria. So, it can be said that “the forces of literary production consist in the application of labour-power” (Eagleton, 2006, p. 47). On the other hand, for a literary text to fulfil its function – this is to be consumed – there is a human factor which is needed: the audience. However, for the audience to receive a given literary text, factors such as exchange or distribution are needed. All in all, the circle that a literary text completes from its production to its consumption appears to be tightly related to the dominant economic structures as thanks to them the flow of printed ideas keeps on working: "in developed capitalist social formations, the dominant LMP of large-scale capitalist printing, publishing and distributing reproduces the dominant GMP" (Eagleton, 2006, p. 51).



**(iii) General Ideology (GI)**

It can be considered as a “dominant [or] hegemonic ideology” (Eagleton, 2006, p. 54) that thanks to a whole apparatus of discourses and values gives shape to a general mindset. Such compound of discourses and values is what determines the social order and coherently articulates the rules of social interaction and coexistence. Henceforth, GI is what triggers a social *modus operandi* that influences any kind of act of relation, production or interaction. For example, within a capitalist (GI) context the LMP would be influenced by market constraints. Then, the production, the exchange and the distribution are focussed on massive consumption, so the text becomes a best seller. Not only is capitalism at the service of the production of the text but it is within this framework that capitalism itself finds its perpetuation. Hence, it is possible for a text to convey a certain ideology through its consumption:

Literature is an agent as well as effect of such struggles, a crucial mechanism by which the language and ideology of an imperialist class establishes its hegemony, or by which a subordinated state, class or region preserves and perpetuates at the ideological level an historical identity shattered or eroded at the political (Eagleton, 2006, p. 55).

**(iv) Authorial Ideology (AuI)**

According to Eagleton, there might be the possibility that the author’s biographical aspects might also become factors of influence within the meaning of a given text. A maker of a story will intrinsically have one’s own story, so issues such as “social class, sex, nationality, religion, geographical region and so on” (Eagleton, 2006, p. 57) also determine the narrative course. Regardless of these factors, Eagleton considers that in order to influence the ideology of a text, AuI and GI are not direct homologues, as the author’s ideology might not always be parallel to the general one. Furthermore, there is a tendency to identify the text’s ideology with the author’s one, when they might not be parallel either; “it is a question of specifying the ideological determinations of the text -

determinations which include the effect of the author's mode of insertion into GI" (Eagleton, 2006, p. 60)

(v) **Aesthetic Ideology (AI)**

Eagleton defines AI as "the specific aesthetic region of GI" (Eagleton, 2006, p 60), for its direct subordination to the dominant superstructures:

**history/ideology → dramatic text → dramatic production**

**history → ideology → literary text**

As Eagleton portrays in the third chapter of *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary*, not only historical and ideological factors determine the conception and production of the text, but vice versa; "the literary text [...] produces ideology" (Eagleton, 2006, p. 68). It is around this framework, where different factors are influenced by one another, that all the literary apparatus build criticism, theories, genres and even narrative techniques by which the message and its ideology are introduced.

(vi) **Text**

It might be defined as a systematic conjoint of all the constituents listed above:

**GMP → GI → LMP ← GMP → GI → LMP ← AI → GI**

According to Eagleton, the existence of a GMP triggers the existence of a GI that supports and reproduces it. In a literary context, this GI reproduces the GMP through a specific LMP, which at the same time is reproduced by GI traces present in each text. This relationship between LMP and GI is held by the production – exchange – consumption factors that characterise the distribution of any text. Hence, it can be said that the production system that comes from the LMP endorses the AI, which is a sublevel of the GI. The importance between GI and AI comes from the determination of both the production and consumption of a text, as "the literary text is a text (as opposed to 'book') because it is read" (Eagleton,

2006, p. 69). Hence, “reading [becomes] an ideological decipherment of an ideological product” (Eagleton, 2006, p. 62).

To sum up, Eagleton’s *Materialist Categories* endorse for a more complete reading of any text. Although the consumption of entertainment goods has a clear purpose, there might be political or ideological hints working at the service of the ruling apparatus. It seems to me that Eagleton’s purpose is far from condemning this kind of consumption. Rather than that, his analysis of the different categories that interact with each other when a literary text is built, may help readers have a three-dimensional experience while consuming any kind of entertainment goods. In other words, it is a matter of perspective if to enjoy a novel and get teased by the author/ narrator, or just get into the fiction’s game being aware as conscious reader. On the other hand, such analysis can also be applied when consuming other goods that are not literary, but cinematographic, as it is often the case in present day society. Eagleton’s study together with his notions of Marxism and aesthetic value, provide the 21<sup>st</sup> century consumer from an objective perspective in the sense that it might help them become aware of the ideas that the superstructures may implement in their minds while consuming a TV series, for example. It is precisely because of a general lack of critical criteria that the spectatorship is lead to a massive consumption of these entertainment goods; triggering a binge-watching tendency which is largely popular among younger generations. They seem to become subjects of the dominant apparatus through the addictive act of consuming entertainment goods that often seem to implement and reinforce the mainstream codes and convictions. Henceforth, the mere act of watching a show, might have a political tenor.

### 3. JANE AUSTEN AND THE SILVER FORK NOVELS MODE OF PRODUCTION

The English 19<sup>th</sup> Century became a sort of predecessor for modernity and the capitalist society as we understand it today. Although this period is best known for Queen Victoria's politics, there is a period of time in which England's lords and ladies flattered around ball saloons: the Regency Period. This is the period between 1795 and 1837. In fact, during this period, King George the III was invalidated by the honourable members of the House of Lords in 1811 through the Regency Act. Such document determined the eldest of the King's sons to become a Regent due to his father's inability to rule the country because of his illness. Hence, the Prince Regent, George IV, is the one who gives name to a period that is best-known thanks to authors like Jane Austen. Although the period was severally marked by the revolution murmurs and by the constant threat of Napoleon, what is more appealing from these days before the Victorian era is the contrast between wealth and poverty. Within this context of social polarization, the rich were getting progressively richer, while the middle and lower classes felt appealed by the movements of higher spheres. Generally, silver fork writers did have a boundary with the highest spheres of societies, which not only made their stories more appealing, but also more successful thanks to the fascination the plot may arouse among their readers. Thus, around 1820 the marketing apparatus of publishing houses seemed to work at a dynamic pace, so gossips and scandals from the upper classes were published in the shape of fiction: "fashionable-life novels [...] celebrat[ed] their close attachment to consumerism, celebrity news, insider social information and the wider world of power and politics." (Copeland, 2012, p. 2)

If one thinks of one of the most representative names within this vogue of fashionable novels, perhaps Jane Austen would be the most expected answer. In fact, "the tradition [...] of the woman's novel, particularly as represented by Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen, [is] there to apply the brakes, to keep the reader focused on a plot and to provide the all-important conclusion to the tale." (Copeland, 2012, p. 37). In this sense, throughout this chapter I will approach Jane Austen from a materialist criticism point of view, applying to her novels Terry Eagleton's categories as defined in *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* and discussed above.

**(i) Jane Austen's GMP**

Jane Austen's novels were published within the framework of the emerging liberal economic values that later would shape the so-called capitalist society. It is in fact along the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that the basis of the current society was settled. Hence, it could be said that by the 1820s Regency England became one of the greatest empires after the English victory in the battle of Waterloo.

**(ii) Jane Austen's Literary Mode of Production (LMP)**

The extent to which a text becomes successful, does not only depend on the writer's rhetoric abilities, but may also be due to certain social and economic factors that are hidden between the lines. Those ideological and economic superstructures work at a similar pace in order to convey a given meaning within the different texts that are published by means of structures of production, distribution, exchange and consumption. Take, for example the 19<sup>th</sup> century English Novel. To be more precise: the "three-decker (three volume) novel" (Eagleton, 2006, p. 52). Such genre in such a given format not only became a popular entertainment good, but also one of the tools that the superstructure used as a mean to the divulgation of certain values or ideas among the population. "The silver fork mode, with its potentially explosive materials and profoundly ambivalent attitude, at once reflected and exploited the middle-class obsession with the aristocracy that characterized the Reform Bill era" (Hughes, 1992, p. 330). Moreover, personalities like "Henry Colburn, the primary publisher of silver fork novels, outraged contemporaries by placing advertisements into the columns of the daily newspapers distinguished as news, an unheard practice" (Copeland, 2012, p. 16). Thanks to the commodification of the middleclass and their rising index of literacy, people like Colburn worked as the link between the authors and the population, speeding the distribution and exchange periods of time so "novels of fashionable life were read by all classes in every town, in every village" (Copeland, 2012, p. 16) by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, the format these stories had was taken for granted according to Hughes, who highlights this particular genre in basis of the social. Hence, silver fork novels shall

occupy a separate place within the novel format, as their purpose was basically "that [of] Regency exclusives attempt[ing] to validate themselves and to maintain their social prestige" (Hughes, 1992, p. 332).

**(iii) Jane Austen's General Ideology (GI)**

Given the changes in society, due to the Industrial Revolution, that seemed to go against the aristocracy's old order, silver fork novels and advertising appeared to generate some conflict between the political left and right as:

"the levelling of hierarchical distinctions in a consumer culture could pose a threat to either end of the political spectrum. Moreover, most silver fork novels were actively selling their readers a Whig version of reform, which was by no means intended to be understood as democratic" (Copeland, 2012, p. 30).

On the other hand, these works that typically looked up to the most exclusive spheres of society, used to promote a certain admiration towards the higher classes. Indeed, Regency exclusives attempted to settle their social status employing narrative techniques that made them look even more exclusive and less accessible. Thanks to fashionable writers who often claimed to be part – or at least quite close – of the spheres they wrote about, the English socialite became the previous stage to the celebrity's universe.

**(iv) Jane Austen's Authorial Ideology (AuI)**

Although there is little evidence of the values of the Revolution, Austen's didactics seems to rely on the traditional Christian moral codes rather than in political ones. Austen's moral thoughts seem to be so much present in most of her texts. It is precisely her quality of Protestant that shapes her narratives with a strong sense of duty and morality – admirable qualities of rational beings –. "In Austen's world, where there are so many corrupting influences abroad, it is vital to look your own principles and take your own decisions" (Eagleton, 2013, p. 110). So, her paper within the construction of an *atomic society* appears to be quite important in terms of their transmissibility by means of *three-deckered novels* such as *Pride*

*and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park* or *Sanditon*. For this reason, it could be said that Austen lived in an era of transition from old Christian values – a set of social conducts and behaviours that may allow life in communion – towards the individualistic modern moral code similar to Immanuel Kant’s ethics. It is no strange that phrases like “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen, 1813 / 2001, p. 1) might appear in the opening of one of her most well-known novels.

(v) **Jane Austen’s Aesthetic Ideology (AI)**

Considering Austen’s era as a transition between the old and the new order, it is not a surprise that certain historical factors such as the Reform Bill Act may explain given traits from her famous plots. For example, in Grayson and company’s study *Discovering Structure in Social Networks of 19th Century Fiction*, there seems to be a tendency for Austen to reproduce more homogenic societies by the interrelationships between characters, who seem to belong to the same or similar stratum:

Novel	# <i>N</i>	# <i>E</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>d</i>	R1	R2
Northanger Abbey	94	255	2.4	0.06	7	1
Pride and Prejudice	117	485	2.4	0.07	10	1
Persuasion	136	437	2.8	0.05	16	2
Sense and Sensibility	158	508	2.6	0.04	12	2
Emma	193	620	2.7	0.05	17	5
Mansfield Park	218	649	2.9	0.03	16	7
Oliver Twist	286	696	3.2	0.02	16	10
Great Expectations	288	741	3.1	0.02	19	8
Bleak House	516	1526	3.4	0.01	44	16

**Table 1: Summary of network results, top 6 - Austen, last 3 - Dickens. #*N* is number of nodes, #*E* is number of edges, *l* is the average path length, *d* is the network edge density. The numbers of communities identified at resolutions R1 and R2 are also reported.**

As **Table 1** (Grayson & co, 2016, p. 326) shows, the societies that Austen portrayed both in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* not only contain

fewer characters than other novels from that period, but also suggest more restricted and exclusive social networks. On the other hand, Austen's dialogues are often used to draw the readers' attention throughout the narrative. So, it is mainly by the different interactions among her characters that the audience gets involved in the plot, because "stories told in the third person [have] much more connected networks than stories told in the first person" (Elson & co, 2010, p. 145). However, Jane Austen's narrative techniques seem to go a step further as they introduce focalization. By a shift in focalization, Austen not only creates a fluid narration of the facts, but also includes biased thoughts when addressing or describing characters in order to guide her readership's opinion. Furthermore, Elson's study also highlights the fact that the vast majority of Austen's plots are set up in a rural context. Presumably, urban social networks do vanish attention and action by the multiple interactions among characters in an extended area of confluence, whereas a rural context constraints these movements to a reduced number of characters, so the audience is more focused on the plot:

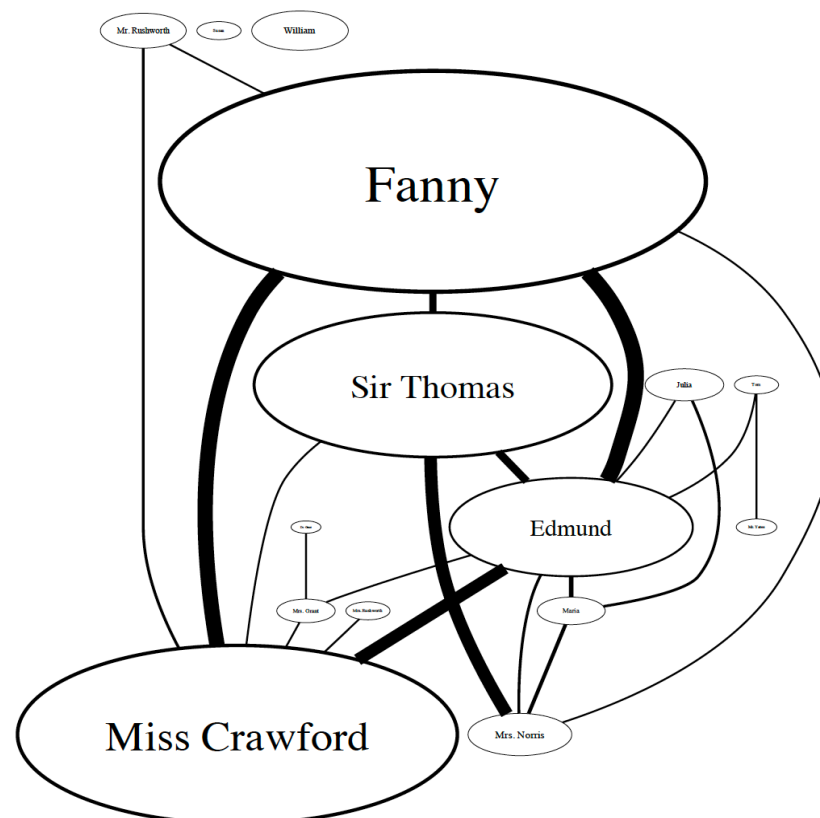


Figure 1: Automatically extracted conversation network for Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*.



As **Figure 1** (Elson & co, 2010, p. 143) exemplifies, Austen's plots seem to be directed by the dialogue interactions of a few main characters and their secondary characters support. The resulting social network seems to illustrate a parallelism between Austen's character's interactions and the barriers found in a real network from a specific social class. In the case of Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, she is the only lower-class character that seems to be allowed to take part in Austen's networks.

**(vi) Jane Austen's Text**

Then, which could be the cause for novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* or *Mansfield Park* to become so popular, even nowadays? According to Eagleton, Jane Austen's popularity would not only come from the love stories of those members of the higher spheres, who glanced at each other during marvellous balls, she shared with her readership. Typically, Regency romances had a dose of romanticism mixed with an insight look into the aristocratic spheres and social networks. Hence, that these kind of narratives became trendy "can be attributed to its irresistible if paradoxical formula of exclusivism for the masses" (Hughes, 1992, p. 329). Therefore, there seems to be a definite pattern in the portrayal of the upper classes as fashionable social groups in Regency romances: exclusivity to exclude. On the other hand, that Regency romance's consumers were "primarily motivated by the vulgar aspirations of the social climber" (Hughes, p. 339) would not explain the causes of the first so-called best sellers in modern history on its own. Going back to Eagleton's categories for Materialist Criticism, the regency period LPM (three volume novel) allowed a certain level of commodity within the production system in which middle- and upper-class writers could develop their narratives supported by renowned publish houses that distributed their works among the population – typically, the higher classes. On the other hand, although authors like Jane Austen did not deal with details of their historical context, there were certain cultural and social values standing for the status quo hegemony.

All in all, the Austen effect is by no means an isolated one, as her texts are a current source of inspiration for contemporary fiction makers in any of its genres. Perhaps

one may attribute a large part of Austen's long-lasting success to her vivid and sharp narrative techniques, or even to her clever shifts in the focalization of the narrative flow, which is done with rather gentleness and subtlety. If human beings are by extension social beings, this means that a given spectrum of interactions is expected. Henceforth, the dissipation of these human beings into smaller groups that conform the different societies brings with itself a moral order that intrinsically conforms them in different levels of a pyramid, determining their social status, their role in society and their inherent privileges and duties. Furthermore, it is at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the Industrial Revolution, hand in hand with capitalism, established the new rules of the social game. Then, individuals who become part of a society perceive themselves as the atoms that constitute a larger social tissue. Individualism embraces human beings into consumerism and this may explain the arising curiosity of middle classes to know the ones above them better. In a similar way as tabloids and the pink press, silver fork novels looked up to those remote and snob lifestyles, providing the audience the dose of gossip they needed to forget about their natural condition in the stage they were occupying. So, Jane Austen can be considered not only the source of inspiration of modern reproductions of her works in multiple formats, but also the foremother of a cultural behaviour.

#### 4. BRIDGERTON AND NETFLIX'S MODE OF PRODUCTION

Nowadays, the way in which entertainment goods are consumed has evolved from publishing houses to "video on demand" (Matrix, 2014, p. 120) – available on a wide variety of streaming platforms –, and from the three-deckered novel to whole seasons ready to be consumed instantly. Hence, the 21st century's "entertainment is fast becoming an all-you-can-eat buffet" (Matrix, 2024, p. 119) in which consumers are developing a so-called "binge-watching habit" (Matrix, 2014, p. 121). Within this framework of entertainment fast-consumption is where fresh proposals – like Netflix's show *Bridgerton* – pop up. Shonda Rhimes' show which premiered in December 28<sup>th</sup> became increasingly successful in a matter of weeks. The Austenian atmosphere, socialite's gossips, sexiness and beautiful saloons are some of the ingredients of this new magical potion Netflix algorithms have cooked in collaboration with Shonda Land. The show constantly reminds Regency romances, in which ladies and gentlemen dancing until the night would vanish into the charming daffodils from some rational garden. Furthermore, this historical romance also resembles one of the most successful TV shows in pop culture: *Gossip Girl*. It is through Lady Whistledown's column that the audience is lead into the *ton*'s universe. She becomes the narrative voice over that seems to control London's season and socialite. Her omnipresence is not only useful at the time to shift focalization, but provides the spectatorship with the right dose of morbidity; exactly the one to get attached to the show and binge it in a matter of hours:

"I think the show really provides an incredible escape for audiences at a time where that's exactly what's needed," Van Dusen says." *Bridgerton* is this lavish, vibrant, steamy Regency love story; it is about romance, love and joy; I think all of those things are really universal themes people are responding to." (Andreeva, 2021)

- Chris Van Dusen, *Deadline*

Precisely because of the shape of historical romance, *Bridgerton* succeeds at the time to draw an appealing plot that seems to go beyond balls, gossip and feathers. In this chapter, I will try to approach the various elements of the *Bridgerton*'s potion according to Eagleton's *Materialist Categories* with the purpose of understanding what has conditioned its success better.

(i) ***Bridgerton's* General Mode of Production**

The twentieth and the twenty-first centuries are politically, socially and economically shaped by capitalist parameters that intrinsically condition Western society. Thus, there are some reasons that might make one think *Bridgerton's* adaptation into a Netflix show and its success are premeditated. Although Junia Quinn's *The Duke and I* may have changed its format, Netflix found this entertainment good more profitable as a streaming show, which was available on their platform, produced by Shonda Rhimes. The truth is that the examination of Netflix's market conditions has born fruits:

"*Bridgerton* premiered on Netflix in December 2020 and was announced by Netflix that it had become their 'biggest series ever' with 82 million households around the world tuning into it in its first 28 days online" (Ostrowski, 2021, p. 1).

(ii) ***Bridgerton's* Literary Mode of Production**

Julia Quinn's historical romance based on the English Regency Era might look back into the silver fork novel's format in terms of its LMP. However, the slightest influence from Henry Colburn's mode of production seems to have evolved as the modern order has settled over the past two centuries. While Colburn and company used to popularise fashionable novels by means of the advertisement on newspapers, Netflix goes a step further and implements several algorithms that – together with a solid advertising strategy – guarantee the total success of their productions. "To keep its customers interested, Netflix invests in new and exclusive content" (Oat, 2013, p. 4) like Shonda Rhimes' *Bridgerton*. It is precisely their *modus operandi* that has spread a "Netflix effect" (Matrix, 2014, p. 119) among Western population which has placed the company at the head of the streaming platforms Top 200:

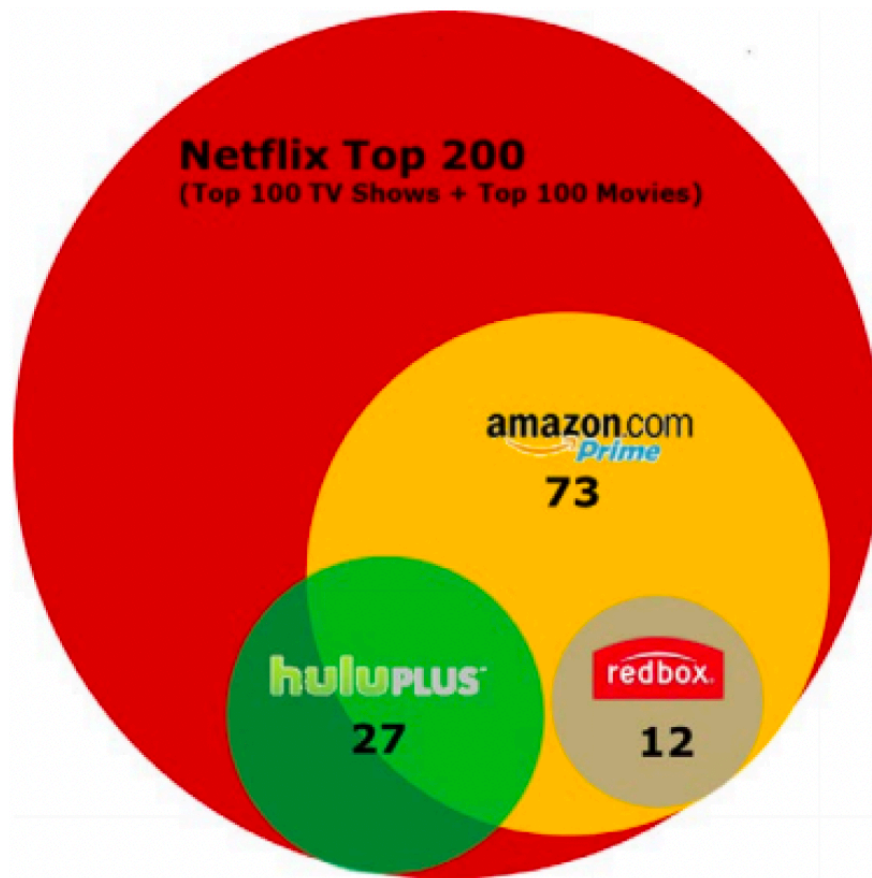


Figure 2: Netflix. Q4 12 letter to shareholders. Technical report, January 2013. <http://ir.netflix.com/>.

As Figure 2 illustrates, Netflix is "becoming a producer and distributor of shows and movies with a fully global reach" (Gomez-Uribe & Co, 2015, p. 6) thanks to the intersection that exists between the Internet and storytelling. In other words, Netflix's business structures seem to be pretty much based on the different algorithms that both collect information from customers and provide them with an exclusive and unique experience that differs from the rest of the customers depending on the choices one might take. On the other hand, the availability of a whole season on streaming provides the costumer with certain freedom, as it allows its consumption in different time intervals, either a more relaxed consumption or a binge-watching afternoon.

(iii) ***Bridgerton's General Ideology***

The hegemonic ideology within the *Bridgerton's* production is clear: capitalism. Hence, all the economic apparatus from Netflix has worked on different market analysis that have determined whether the product was profitable or not. In other words, "marketing and business decisions are key to Netflix corporation's growth" (Oat, 2013, p. 5). The final outcome from Julia Quinn's book series adaptation by Shonda Rhimes does not only become an entertainment good, but an economic value which is part of the model of transaction between the streaming company and its users.

(iv) ***Bridgerton's Authorial Ideology***

Once Netflix's marketing department has done its magic by analysing the possible success and profitability *Bridgerton's* adaptation may imply, it is the author's turn. In this specific case, we shall analyse first some aspects from Julia Quinn's work that have subsequently determined Shonda Rhimes' production. Being a historical romance, both Quinn and Rhimes are allowed some room to speak up their minds and introduce more modern claims and concerns such as female sexuality, feminism or a more inclusive perspective of society in terms of race. All these aspects are brought both to paper and screen by means of the aesthetic shape *Bridgerton's* outcomes demonstrate.

(v) ***Bridgerton's Aesthetic Ideology***

In terms of aesthetic, it shall be said that since *Bridgerton* fits into the label of historical romance, there is more room for subversion – or even provocation –. The Regency, therefore, becomes an aesthetic framework in which Daphne's sexual awakening takes place. Indeed, one of the most shocking and appealing aspects from the *Bridgerton's* plot is the female perspective the story is given to such an extent that Rhimes' production – in terms of scenography – is recorded from the female gaze perspective:

"Female protagonists are apt to be somewhat rebellious, whether by nature or forced by circumstances – this is how authors enable

them to behave in a manner somewhat more comfortable to today's reader" (Wyatt & Co, 2007, p. 122).

Sexier, fresher and more adventurous than a traditional Regency romance, this historical romance is able to hook the audience in not only because of its incredible taste and sensuality, but also because of its adventurous cast choices. Regé-Jean Page as Simon Basset (The Duke of Hastings), Golda Rosheuvel as Queen Charlotte or Ruby Baker as Marina Thompson are some of the names of one of the most inclusive a historical romance might have ever shown. Although Quinn's historical romance openly deals with the race of some characters such as the one of the Duke of Hastings, the producer's aesthetic choice here has gone a step further according to her all-inclusive cast line – typical from shows such as *Grey's Anatomy* –.

(vi) ***Bridgerton's Text***

There is something somewhat rather special in the way Quinn and Rhimes revisit Austen's universe and the English Regency Era from this bolder and fresher show. "Julia Quinn's tales are known for their humor and sparkling conversation, [...] warm, loving, and rambunctious Regency-era [...] courtship [...] bliss (Wyatt & Co, 2007, p. 122). Regardless of the solid capitalist structure that sustains the show, Netflix's *Bridgerton* show seems to take silver fork novels' heroines and bring their braveness further to an extent that it would become even scandalous for Jane Austen herself. However, the flattering dresses, the balls and the feathered socialite; this dose of sugar and glamour seems to be wisely counterparted with a very necessary dose of sexual and rational freedom within the figure of heroines such as Daphne or Eloise Bridgerton. Henceforth, far from the exclusive exclusiveness signature of silver fork novels and Regency romances, *Bridgerton* includes a measured plot with balanced characters in the frame of an inclusive cast.

*Bridgerton's* success, therefore, comes from a combination of facts that, aligned as stars, seem to have boosted the success of the mentioned show. Fore and foremost, we should not forget about the economic apparatus that relies behind the production of the

show. Although some might omit the importance the perfect cocktail of algorithms, in fact it is a huge part of the process. Without such market study, the audience's approval would not be assured. Then, an important part of *Bridgerton's* massive popularity is due to a meticulous market exploration. No matter how conditioned the show is by the economic superstructures, the human component that surrounds it is also a reason for its success. As it has been previously explored, Julia Quinn's adaptation for the streaming business provides the audience with bits of sexiness, audacity, gossip and tension that make an entertainment good out of this historical romance. Nonetheless, it seems that the Austinian universe and atmosphere are often revisited when in the need for a pleasant getaway. This makes one think that Jane Austen seems to set a precedent up not only in terms of novel plots or romances, but also in terms of style. Her thoughtful and witty dialogues, her adventurous heroines who sarcastically speak out their minds or her smooth didactics introduce her contemporaries to the start of a new order that still persists nowadays. In other words, Jane Austen's long shade seems to keep on inspiring us in modern times when seeking for some fresher adventures.



## **5. (NEO) REGENCY ROMANCES: 20th AND 21st CENTURY ESCAPIST PLEASURES & THE AESTHETIC VALUE**

The beginning of the Modern Era – the early 19th century – brought with it a series of changes that have had an impact on present-day times. The rural exodus that came about during the Industrial Revolution, the democratization of European states and the strengthening of the capitalist economic system were some of the breakthroughs that made Western society move from the old order of the Ancient Regime to the sparkling market regime. The 19th century not only led way to the world that we all know but was also Jane Austen's cradle. Her Regency romances in which both orders were tossing and seeking for their place have been revisited over and over again within the past centuries. It is well known, for example, that H.F. Brett-Smith, who was the British Army Advisor during WWI, encouraged soldiers that suffered from post-traumatic stress to read Jane Austen's work. Moreover, Winston Churchill was said to be openly delighted by her daughter's readings of *Pride and Prejudice* in 1943, while he was sick of pneumonia. Hence, it is not strange that her work has been adapted and revisited many times and by different authors who even went a step further and created the so-called Neo-Regency romances. All in all, there shall be a rational explanation behind this Austenian fever that seems to blind worldly beings at given moments of their history. According to Terry Eagleton:

"The text, it can be claimed, produces its own reader, even if only to be misread. But the text's own proffered modes of producibility are naturally constructed by the ideological act of reading; and there is no way out of this hermeneutical circle at the level of empirical reception". (Eagleton, 2006, p. 167)

There seems to be a clear value that is related to the given aesthetics any text may show. When a text is consumed, is given a literary value. This act of consumption of a text becomes an "exchange-value" (Eagleton, 2006, p. 166) as the text not only conveys the author's meaning but mingles with the reader's life experience and the aftermath of this is interpretation – what Eagleton likes to call ideology. Then, the context in which all this happens is the one of culture and education, where the conjunction of aesthetics and ideology merge and lead to a personal reproduction of the text that seems to be much influenced by the intrinsic ideology of the text.

Jane Austen's *Aesthetic Value* seems to stand the test of time and has survived in an era in which the pace of consumption goes faster than ever, and concentration span is shorter than ever. Her stories have been adapted both to the big and small screen about a dozen times and have served as a mirror for future generations when looking for some delight. Regency aesthetics has helped those generations overcome the different adversities from modern times in a way that has got us absorbed into her domestic, rural, and exciting atmosphere.

"Jane Austen's stories are love stories. They deal with the relations between the sexes, particularly between young men and women aged seventeen to twenty-five, the age when most of us are caught in an emotional whirlpool, now choosing, now being chosen, or fearing that we will not be chosen at all. She handled this endlessly fascinating theme with a subtlety never achieved before. Though her novels were written nearly two centuries ago, they describe the currents and techniques of what I might call "the higher flirtation" in a way that still entrances us." (Nicolson, 1895, p. 173)

Dukes and duchesses, laced dresses, feathers, balls, tea and butter biscuits, horses, mansions, and young sparkling heroines who dealt with a sarcastic tone the difficulties of their gender and social class. The relationship any reader from any era might have with an Austen's text is just the one of enjoyment and attachment; the feeling that one seems to be escaping from what are their currently surroundings. It is precisely due to the way Jane Austen's novels make the reader feel that her work has succeed in such a way. "In fact, if we read Jane Austen carefully enough, we find that she is not an *escapist* novelist at all: she is the most realistic novelist of her age" (Daiches, 1948, p. 289). However, the later products that came from the source of inspiration directors, producers or other writers found proof in her legacy that there is a possible escapist reading – at least for the remaining worldly beings –. So, as if it was a matter of state, the great producers have embarked themselves in the production of more modern adaptations of Austen's works, like *Emma* (2020) or *Sanditon* (2019), and shows in which she was the primary source of inspiration, like *Bridgerton* (2020). If one looks closely at the dates in which these works are published, they could probably relate them to the fact that the cyclical crisis that affect the economic system and, therefore, the social apparatus leaving some room for the will to escape such difficulties.

Hence, I shall examine *Bridgerton's Aesthetic Value* not only from an economic perspective – which has also had a huge impact – , but also from a social one. The COVID-19 pandemic has prevented a whole generation from emotions for about a year of their lives in which they have experienced a domestic confinement, similarly to Jane Austen's novels. A perfect combination of sexual tension, gossip, drama and high-spheres' ins and outs together with the inclusiveness of this gorgeous cast, have resulted in *Bridgerton* as 2020's show. Present day society was rather exhausted from the domestic confinement the pandemic had caused and Shonda Rhimes' audacity in adapting Quinn's novel into a show has created a window through which it is possible to evade the mind. Once again, Regency fiction and its romances have healed and cheered another generation. So, it can be said that Austen's aesthetic has become a tendency once again – by a more modern approach that is Quinn's and Rhimes – providing the needed bit of fresh air to escape momentarily from anything that was going on.

## 6. CONCLUSION

After having applied Eagleton's Materialist Criticism Categories to the critical discussion of both Austen's silver fork novels and *Bridgerton's* show, it may be argued that the current modes of production seem to have been shaped during the 19<sup>th</sup>'s century, when publishers as Henry Colburn were trying to hook the silver fork readers by the conceptualization of a system that would allow both publicity and engagement with the product. Silver fork novels, as Netflix shows also, were the final outcome of a conscious study of the market at that time, a previous stage of advertisement that culminated in a distribution process that was meant to guarantee a certain index of engagement with the transacted product. So, the superstructure behind the entertainment goods was, and still is, very much based on social, political and economic standards that typically work to reinforce the dominant ideology: the superstructure. Furthermore, these kind of products seem to help the reinforcement of the hierarchy of modern societies; the exclusive content they present to the audience – triggered by fascination – reproduces a given sociological pattern that is able to keep the average consumer tangled to the capitalist system. For example, the recent binge-watching habit that all millennials, boomers and Z generation consumers have acquired is nothing but another alienation strategy of the capitalist regime. On the other hand, Jane Austen's texts have not only contributed to the capitalization of fiction by means of its production and later distribution but her novels have also become a referent to look at and a classic to revisit when in the need of self or collective escape. The Austenian world has been revisited in different shapes; *Gossip Girl*, *Clueless*, and *Bridgerton* are some of the titles that proof Austen's fashion in recent pop culture. After a close analysis of Austen's Aesthetic Value compared to *Bridgerton* it could be argued that her aesthetics becomes the fresh air for different generations when in the need for a break.

In conclusion, it could be argued that the texts that have been analysed throughout this paper share patterns of production, exchange, distribution and aesthetics that, to some extent, trigger the status quo reinforcement by its consumption. In a certain way, the reading or visualization of these entertainment products is not that of pleasure whatsoever. Furthermore, the attachment that the audience feels with any of the texts that have been discussed has a lot more to do with the economic structures that bear their weights, rather than with their plots. What's more, their success may not only depend on the author skills, but on the whole apparatus that provides the final outcome from the

proper means of exchange, advertising and distribution. Then, Austen's aesthetic value seems to be revisited quite often, as it has become a source of wealth for writers and producers over the past decades. Witty characters, social class issues, gossip and balls have been the perfect combination for an audience's taste that has remained faithful to the Regency romances plots and structures, as a collective means of getting away from a dull reality.

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